

Spinning on a cleaner cycle: how media management became 'respectable' under the UK's coalition government

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Spinning on a cleaner cycle: how media management became 'respectable' under the UK's coalition government

Abstract

The issue of media management or 'spin' came to dominate Tony Blair's time in office; so much so that even his own Press Secretary, Alastair Campbell, came to concede that they had over-used it. When David Cameron came to power, although he has acknowledged that he learnt many political lessons from Tony Blair, he was keen to ensure that his Government did not make the same mistakes in terms of the over-use of spin. In this article, based on interviews with key players, a comparison is made between the way the two prime ministers, and in particular their press secretaries, managed their media relations in their first years in office. This article, written by two political journalists who witnessed the first years of Blair and Cameron at first hand, characterises the Blair media regime as practising 'spin heavy' and the Cameron regime, under Andy Coulson, as practising 'spin lite'. It concludes, that both in terms of relations with the media, and how that relationship played out vis a vis coverage, 'spin lite' was a more successful formulation.

Keywords

Spin, spin doctors, political correspondents, prime minister, press secretary, Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell, David Cameron, Andy Coulson

Introduction

"I cannot believe we are the first and only government that has ever wanted to put the best possible gloss on what you've done". So Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister, told the Leveson inquiry into the ethics of the press on May 21st (Faulkner & Chapman 2012). Two days later, Michael Gove, a senior minister in the Cameron Government, suggested that "spin is a term that's been interpreted in many different ways...there've been spin doctors since the Roman Republic". And Lord Justice Leveson, in his report into the culture, practices and ethics of the press, which was commissioned by the British Government following the phone-hacking scandal - also noted that politicians were guilty of "going too far in trying to control the supply of news and information to the public in return for the hope of favourable treatment by sections of the press, to a degree and by means beyond what might be considered to be the fair and reasonable." (Leveson 2012:26)

However, despite Gove's concession that spin has always been a fact of political life and Blair's protestation that he was "a pretty straight sort of guy", despite the passage of years since New Labour won the 1997 General Election, Blair, his Press Secretary Alastair Campbell, and the New Labour Government remain inextricably associated with the art of spinning.

And yet the current British Prime Minister David Cameron, in both Opposition and in Government, has apparently trod the same road. He also employed a former tabloid journalist – Andy Coulson - as his Press Secretary to help his party to power and then to keep it there. But Coulson, caught up in the maelstrom of phone hacking was forced to resign without even surviving a year in Downing Street. Nonetheless the style of media relations he had established in opposition and that he carried into Government, survived him and although it superficially appeared to draw heavily on the heavy-handed techniques of Campbell and New Labour, 'spin' has not – so far at least - been 'the story' of the present coalition government. For Cameron and Coulson seem to have both learnt from New Labour's approach to media-management whilst, at the same time, appearing to have made a clean break from the era of spin that so dogged the last government.

This article, written from the perspective of two political journalists both of whom witnessed at first hand much that is set out here, compares the approaches to media management strategy employed by the Cameron Government in their first year in office with the approach of Tony

Blair. It argues that in the dynamic interplay between journalists and political sources a constant process of thrust and counter-thrust is always taking place. The new Blair Government developed a culture of heavy-handed media control - we have termed it 'spin heavy' - but this in turn spawned a reaction by journalists who sought to counter it by both adopting hostile reporting approaches and by seeking to reveal the spin to their readers whenever it became apparent. This provoked a change of approach by the incoming Cameron Government which, seeing the collapse of one spin regime, sought to introduce a new less intrusive one, which we have characterised as 'spin lite'. **The Context**

As the quotation from Conservative Minister Michael Gove indicates, the origins of political spin go back to the origins of politics. However, as a modern-day phenomenon in British politics it is first associated with Margaret Thatcher and her successful bid for power in 1979 (Thatcher 1993 Bale 2012 and Moore 2013). But it wasn't until the advent of Tony Blair to the leadership of the Labour Party in 1994 that 'spin' became part of the everyday political lexicon (Barnett & Gaber 2001, Campbell 2010, Jones 1997). Indeed the term spin became so closely associated with Blair's New Labour Government that eventually it became the most significant negatively defining characteristics of that administration (Gaber 2007 and Jones 1999 and 2002).

The notion of spin plays an important role in any discussion about the nature of contemporary democracy and the functioning of the political public sphere (Habermas 1964 and 1989). As Savigny observes, the Habermasian notion of the political public sphere, as a space for rational public discourse is fatally undermined by the practitioners of spin as they seek to control the flow of information that finds its way to the public via the media. Hence, public opinion, crucial to the Habermasian political public sphere, is not formed as a result of deliberation, but becomes 'constructed through systems of communication' (Savigny 2002).

However, not all scholars accept that spin is an entirely negative phenomenon as characterised by Savigny and others' (see Patterson 1994 and Franklin 2004 as US and UK critiques). On the one hand, some scholars suggest that the relationship between spin doctors and political journalists is, in the words of Quinn, a "rational-choice 'exchange'" (Quinn 2012) in which spin doctors provide an 'information subsidy' (Lieber & Golan 2011) to journalists in exchange for what they hope will be more favourable, or at least less unfavourable, coverage.

Other scholars have suggested that there is a real public benefit in spin. They argue that in its intention of providing less ambiguous messages from the politician to the public it minimises the obscuring of messages that result from either poor communication or a deliberately biased media (see McNair 2000 & 2003 and Norris 2000 and 2006). And yet others have suggested that if fault there be, in terms of degrading the space for public discussion, it lies far more with the journalists – ‘feral beasts’ in Blair’s valedictory words – than with the political image makers (Lloyd 2004 & Blair 2007).

However, spin is not a ‘one size fits all’ phenomenon. Media managers have to be not only sensitive to the political and media environments within which they are working but also aware of the extent to which journalists develop their own strategies aimed at negating, or at least mitigating, the spin doctors attempts to control the message (Price 2005 and 2010 Robinson 2012). Hence, this article investigates, both from the perspectives of the political media managers and journalists, how the techniques of spin differed between Blair and Cameron’s first year in government. The article is, to some extent, ethnographic, in that the first author was a political journalist at Westminster during the first year of the Cameron Government and the second author was a political journalist during Blair’s first year. However, it is for the most part based on original interviews with key players from both sides of the divide. As a result it seeks to assess the relative success of the two modes of operation as evaluated by both its practitioners – the media managers – and their recipients, the journalists. Clearly whilst no empirical data can be produced to evaluate the success or otherwise of techniques of spin, those in the frontline are probably in a better position to evaluate success and failure than those at a distance, for whilst their evaluations are clearly subjective, they are first-hand and therefore of great scholarly interest.

And this investigation has ramifications far wider than simply the confines of Westminster and the UK. In a globalised world both journalists, and media managers, draw lessons from the experiences of both groups across national divides. The subject of how politicians campaign is one that is frequently reported in the news and are avidly consumed wherever politicians and journalists interact. In addition, the skills of political media management are highly transferable; in the UK; for example, the Labour and Conservative parties have recruited highly paid consultants from the United States and Australia respectively, to provide communications advice and leadership in the run-up to the General Election in 2015.

But there is also a scholarly imperative behind this investigation; and that is, behind the occasional trivialities of the battles between spin doctors and journalists, lie profound questions about the nature of political communications within a society and hence the nature of its democracy. Habermas first coined the term 'political public sphere' in 1964 when he spoke about it as being

"a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body." (Habermas 1964 p. 29)

However, 15 years later when he came to write his most important book on the public sphere he came to see it not in the idealised form described above but as a space that had become transformed by the rise of intermediaries, particularly advertising and political public relations practitioners (see Habermas interview Jeffries 2010). Hence an analysis of the political public relations of two of its most experienced proponents is of considerable value to a wide audience.

The Historical Background

In his final months as Prime Minister, Tony Blair accepted that his government had "paid inordinate attention to courting, assuaging, and persuading the media" (Blair: 2007). The admission, made ten years after he had led the Labour Party to a landslide general election victory in 1997, was prime ministerial confirmation of one of the defining characteristics of his government.

Within a year of New Labour's 1997 victory, Alastair Campbell, the government's Head of Communications, had been summoned before a Parliamentary committee to answer questions on the government's approach to communications. In 2001 an opinion poll showed that 92 per cent of respondents wanted the government to place "more emphasis on practical achievements and less on presentation" (King: 2001). Two years later, when Campbell left Downing Street, following accusations that the Government's dossier making the case for war with Iraq had been 'sexed up', headlines declared: 'Blair loses King of Spin' 'Dr Spin Quits', and 'Exit the Spinmeister'. Campbell, appointed as Blair's press secretary in 1994, later reflected that "as we got more professional, at first the media liked it and thought it was a good thing" (Campbell 2002: 18), while the Guardian's Andrew Sparrow notes that while

Campbell's name is now often used as "by-word for how not to do spin, everyone forgets that for a long time he was very, very effective" (Sparrow 2011b). And Chris Mullin, a Labour MP from 1987 to 2010, described David Cameron's approach to handling the media as "strikingly similar to Blair's – he attempted to ride the tiger" (Mullin 2011c), with perhaps the most symbolic point of comparison being Cameron's appointment of Andy Coulson as his Head of Communications in 2007. Three years before a general election, the same distance from polling day as Blair's appointment of Campbell, Cameron brought in a man, like Campbell, with a background in tabloid journalism (Coulson had edited the News of the World from 2003 to 2007) – to play a central role in "dragging the Tory party back on to the centre ground, the entire strategy of which was taken from the New Labour blue print" (Mullin 2011c).

In 1994, following four successive general election defeats for Labour, Tony Blair, Labour's then Shadow Home Secretary, set out his priorities for the party's recovery: "You have got to understand that the only thing matters is the media, the media, the media", Blair declared (Price: 302), a mantra which many would argue characterised his 13-year leadership of the party.

A decade later, David Cameron's progress to the leadership of the Conservative Party was against the backdrop of three election defeats for the Conservative Party. After securing the leadership of the Conservative Party in 2005 Cameron is said to have read 'The Unfinished Revolution', whose author the late Philip Gould was a central figure in the modernisation of the Labour Party, and accepted the case for "message discipline and instant rebuttal" (Peter Riddell 2011o).

The post of Cameron's press secretary was filled by George Eustace, a man described as "honest, straightforward... [he] did not practice the dark arts" (Osborne: 2007), with former Tory MP and journalist Paul Goodman arguing that the decision to appoint Eustace was "partly a reaction and also an indication of the way David Cameron works: he has a group of trusted people who he keeps close to him" (Goodman 2011a). However, with David Cameron and George Osborne, the Shadow Chancellor, shaping "the entire strategy of dragging the Tory party back on to the centre ground on the New Labour blue print" (ibid), the Conservative leader accepted that it was "important to get certain key journalists on board, [but] it is even more important to have good relations with proprietors and editors – particularly the Murdoch group" (Jackie Ashley 2011p). Accordingly, Cameron, with echoes

of Blair's visit to the News Corporation's Hayman Island conference off the coast of Australia (Blair: 96), flew to the Channel Island home of the Barclay brothers, the owners of the Telegraph Group (Elliott & Hanning: 301) in late 2006; two years later he dined with Rupert Murdoch on the latter's private yacht, a move seen pivotal in the Sun's declaration of support for Cameron the following year (Brook & Wintour 2009).

A crucial role in this build-up was played by Andy Coulson, appointed as the party's Head of Communications in 2007 (Brooke 2007). Coulson's arrival followed a period in which the Tory leader had been embroiled in an internal party row over its policy on schools, with "the only upside of ...the mauling Cameron received in the press (about his handling of the issue) lent weight to the argument that the Party had to do something to strengthen its media operation" (Bale: 335). However, while the Conservative Party's approach to winning power drew extensively on the 'spin model' adopted by New Labour in the mid-1990s, in government its approach to communication has not suffered the same degree of criticism as did its predecessor. On arriving at Downing Street, David Cameron promised that he would put aside the tools designed to react to and control the 24 hour news agenda (Jones 2010: 24). "It's impossible to do," according to the press secretary of the leader of the Liberal Democrats (the Conservative's coalition partner). "It's something you say. What if a story breaks late at night?" (Interview 2011g). But Matt Tee, the former Head of Government Communications at the Cabinet Office, reported that within three weeks of Labour leaving Downing Street in May 2010, "the TVs were turned off, other than in the press office" (Interview 2011h), a move which suggests that a calmer approach to the media was being pursued. The change in style was partly deliberate, partly unavoidable.

However, it is one thing to assert that there was a dramatic change in the approach to media management adopted by the two incoming governments; but media management, or spin' is not a 'one size fits all' model, a simple matter of it either being present or absent. It is an ongoing process, sometimes foregrounded, sometimes not, which involves the use of myriad techniques by media managers in their attempt to both secure maximum of positive coverage and the minimum of negative. The section that follows is based on an analysis of spin by Gaber (2000) in which, using his own experience as a practitioner he set out, for the first time in the academic literature, a typology of spin.

Changing techniques of spin

1. Handling Journalists

Hand-picking compliant journalists, and freezing out those deemed to have written unfavourable copy, was a chosen tactic of Campbell's, with one-time Labour spinner Joy Johnson arguing that he "rewards those that he favours with access but only if he deems that they are useful vehicles towards creating a favourable political climate that will lead to electoral success" (Interview 2011e).

Political journalists were "seduced, bullied, courted, and criticised in an attempt to ensure that they are as 'on message' as New Labour's ministers and MPs" (Kuhn: 2000). Veteran Westminster journalist Nick Assinder recalled how The Times' political correspondent Tom Baldwin, now Ed Miliband's senior communications advisor, became known as "Alastair's man", with Peter Mandelson boasting about his "captured castles" (Interview 2011j).

Under the coalition government, according to Nigel Nelson, there is said to be "no adverse pressure, and no pushing of an editorial line. There is no threat that people won't be given stories. Relations with Downing Street are good...it's partly the temperament, and a sense that it became counter-productive" (Interview 2011b).

And while Henry Macrory, the former Head of Conservative Press, admitted that there could be "fairly heated phone calls if something has been written up unfairly or inaccurately" (Interview: 2011d), James McGrory, press secretary to Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, insisted that there was "no freezing out" (Interview 2011g), arguing: "If you only speak to people who are nice about the Lib Dems, then frankly you are speaking to about three people" (ibid).

2. Trailing

The Coalition government has continued the practice of 'trailing' and leaking major announcements, with "a technique used widely by New Labour entrenched still further: the government of the day has to be able to try to set the agenda" (Nick Assinder 2011j). Some coalition ministers, such as Home Secretary, Theresa May (Hansard 2010), have been reprimanded for trailing statements to the press before announcing them in Parliament, while a series of pre-Budget leaks prompted an urgent question from a Labour Treasury minister (Hansard 22 Mar 2012) and an angry rebuke for Chancellor George Osborne by Andrew Tyrie, the chairman of the Treasury Select Committee (BBC 2012). However, the media seemed less interested in these issues than under New Labour, an era when a series of

statements outside Parliament prompted a rare critical intervention from former Prime Minister John Major (Major 2003).

3. Burying Bad News

When Jo Moore, then a special advisor to Labour's Transport Secretary Stephen Byers at the Department for Transport, advised colleagues in an email sent on September 11th 2001, that it was "a very good day to get out anything we want to bury", a phrase entered the lexicon of spin. But the email, says Matt Tee, was "the straw which broke the camel's back... she was by no means the only one." (Interview 2011h). Today, according to former BBC correspondent Nicholas Jones, attempting to bury bad news would be "beyond the pale" (Interview: 2010j) whilst Macrory added that "burying bad news is now regarded as a really dangerous thing to get involved in" (Interview: 2010d).

Nevertheless, evidence of the practice can still be identified. Despite ministerial denials political journalists formed the strong impression that that they used the engagement of Prince William and Kate Middleton as 'cover' for a series of potentially negative stories (Boulton: 2010) And Labour MPs raised questions over the timing of Coulson's departure from Downing Street (Wintour & Davies: 2011). At the end of July 2011, when the last week of the summer Parliamentary sitting was dominated by the appearances of Rupert and James Murdoch in front of a parliamentary committee, the Government was accused of "holding back piles of potentially embarrassing reports for publication just as the Select Committee got under way" (Murphy 2011) and of deciding "that this afternoon was the perfect time to release his [Cameron's] full list of media meetings – the government certainly loves burying bad news on Fridays" (Waugh 2011).

4, Briefing: the role of the special advisor

At the Labour Party's 1995 conference, Kevin Maguire, then Labour Editor of the Daily Mirror, reflected on a gathering which had "been like dropping into Spinulike for a snack all week: if political journalists did not like the spin which was on that day's menu they just changed doctors" (Jones: 170).

The dangerous habit of briefing against party colleagues can be traced back to the Labour Party's practice of choosing its shadow cabinet via internal elections, a process described by Nicholas Jones (Interview 2011i) as "poisonous". In contrast, the shadow

cabinets of both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats are chosen by their respective party leaders.

At his very first Cabinet meeting in on May 8th 1997, Tony Blair reportedly told his team of ministers – inherited from the last elected Shadow Cabinet – that “we will sink or swim together... there was too much chattering to the media going on” (Campbell 2011: 12) But the diaries of Alastair Campbell reveal a culture of briefing – or perhaps paranoia of briefing – well established during New Labour’s first year in office (ibid).

The culture of briefing could be seen at its most damaging, during Labour’s term in office, in the rivalry between the two most powerful men in government, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. “Brown could not settle down and did not do so for another 13 years” wrote political commentator Steve Richards, with “the itch that Brown couldn’t stop himself scratching... the smouldering resentment that Blair had taken the first prize of politics” (Rawnsley 2000:145) .

The problematic relationship between Blair and Brown, and how their supporters ensured that the battle was taken beyond Downing Street, according to Government information chief, Matt Tee, gave “everyone else the excuse to play... between their people it was war – it was hatred – and everyone else’s special advisers felt they had permission to play the same game” (Interview 2011h).

In contrast, the relationship between David Cameron and his Chancellor, George Osborne, appears to be stronger, although Osborne has been accused of having “disloyally briefed” (Osborne 2010) journalists against Cameron, and the relationship between the pair is said to have undergone a “shift in dynamic” (Martin 2011) in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal, but beyond this – and from one of the author’s first-hand experience of dealing with the respective Special Advisors (SpAds) and spokespeople for both men – it is hard to reach any conclusion other than the pair are working as well together as do any Chancellor and Prime Minister.

"David Cameron and George Osborne spent a fair time looking at the relationship between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and trying to work out what they would do differently”, reported Matt Tee (Interview 2011h). “I couldn’t point to any story where David Cameron and George Osborne’s people had been briefing. When you have that environment it’s much harder for the briefings to happen.”

Indeed, within weeks of coming to power, both David Cameron and Nick Clegg were reported to have warned the government's newly appointed team of SpAds that briefing against government colleagues would not be tolerated, with the 66 newly-appointed special advisers told that they would "automatically be dismissed" if found responsible of working on "inappropriate material or personal attacks" (Jones 2010: 373). The message was repeated at the end of 2011. (Forsyth 2011)

However, repeat offending by at least one of the two SpAds at the Department of Communities and Local Government, saw David Cameron warned of the "unacceptable behaviour" by the then Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell" (Singleton 2011), but other than the Guardian, no national paper pursued the story. Whether 10 Downing Street itself was entirely innocent is debatable: Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke's plans to reduce sentences for knife crime were said to have been briefed against to tabloid newspapers by Downing Street (Greenslade 2010), while Clarke himself is reported to have complained about Downing Street's treatment of Andrew Lansley as opposition mounted against the Health Secretary's Health and Social Care bill (Watt 2011). There have also been reports of a spat amongst the Downing Street SpAds themselves (Walters 2011)

This isn't to say that special advisers are no longer a key part of the government's communications machine. While the rapid expansion seen under New Labour – the 32 advisers employed at the end of John Major's government had expanded to 81 (with 26 advisers based at No. 10) by January 2001 (Jones, 2002: 5) – has not been matched, the numbers remain high. From a starting point of 66 in June 2010, a month after the coalition was formed, the number of SpAds had risen to 74 – a rise of 17 per cent – by April 2011 (McClory 2011). "We spin. We employ a lot of spinners," (James McGrory 2011f) said one, but the ground on which they spin has changed dramatically.

In seeking to understand how and why the two parties, when entering into government in 1997 and 2010 respectively, differed in their approach to media management, it is important to consider a number of comparative variables.

1. The immediate political context

The first point of comparison between Labour and the Conservatives (the dominant party in the British coalition government) is the psychological effects that 18 years in

opposition had on the Labour Party between losing power in 1979 and Blair's 1997 victory. General Election. Since the 1945 General Election, with the exception of the Daily Mirror, no paper has consistently supported Labour, and while the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail have never flinched in their backing of the Conservatives, The Times, the Sun, and the Daily Express have also usually lent their support (Stoddart: 2010). This explains why the Conservative Party did not suffer from what Andrew Sparrow describes as Labour's "party cultural" problem: "in 100 years of history Labour never felt it had the press on its side" (Sparrow 2011b).

The effects ran deep, with Campbell declaring his determination to ensure that Tony Blair did not get "the same treatment" as previous Labour leaders (2002:19). The election defeat of 1992, according to the Guardian's political columnist, Jackie Ashley, was particularly damaging for the party, as senior Labour figures believed that the press, in particular the Murdoch press, contributed heavily to the party's defeat (Interview 2011p) a perception that was only intensified by the Sun's headline on the day after the election – "It's the Sun Wot Won It".

For the Conservatives, however, the comfort of the media's historic support was generally reassuring. "If you are a Tory leader you have to be messing up big time to lose the Telegraph and the Sun" said Andrew Sparrow, adding: "If you are a Labour leader, unless you are trying really hard these people will make your life a misery" (Interview 2011b).

2. The Differing Personalities Involved

A second key comparison lies with the personalities of the key spinners involved. For Labour, Alastair Campbell had appeared frequently on TV before his appointment as Blair's press secretary and, according to Nicholas Jones, was reluctant to give up that side of his career (Interview 2011i). In contrast, Andy Coulson, as editor of News of the World, kept a low profile, even during the paper's long-running campaign for the introduction of a so-called 'Sarah's Law' (Interview 2011j) a UK equivalent of the American 'Megan's Law'. By contrast, so prominent was Campbell, that a first biography of him had been written before the end of Labour's first term (Sparrow 2003:188);

Unlike Coulson, Campbell's "role of official Downing Street spokesman...[was] fatally combined with that of high-octane, top political spinner on behalf of the Blair operation" (White 2010: 51). For the first three years of the Labour government, Campbell

held twice-daily lobby briefings with political correspondents- “virtuoso performances...a more dramatic impact on the relationship between the office and the political lobby than any man who had held the job before him”, claimed former Labour spin doctor Lance Price (2010:334). And, as Campbell himself subsequently admitted, he held a low opinion of political journalists. “I was aggressive but felt I had to be, because we were dealing with a dreadful press” was his diary entry for August 28th (2011:193). “Ridicule was part of Campbell’s armoury. He turned on journalists he didn’t like and threatened them. Coulson learned a lot of lessons in that respect”, observed Mike Granatt (Interview 2011f). And unlike Coulson, who had never worked in the Westminster lobby and “does not alert anyone to his personal views and preferences” (Nigel Nelson 2011k), Nigel Nelson, of the Sunday People, described Campbell as being “passionately tribal about Labour” (Interview 2011l).

By 2000 Campbell’s approach was making news, as he noted “Number 10 briefings – especially a lot of the briefings I was doing – were becoming news items in their own right, partly because it was me who was doing them” (2002: 21). Today (2012), lobby briefings are conducted by a civil servant, continuing the practice established by Campbell in 2000 (Price: 353) and ensuring that the Prime Minister’s Press Secretary remains largely behind the scenes. Andy Coulson, and his successor Craig Oliver, bar a recently filmed run-in with a BBC Political Correspondent (Groves 2012), preferred lower profiles, and are not usually seen at the lobby briefings. Instead a civil servant, usually Steve Field, handles the daily briefings, which based on this writer’s first-hand experience, are generally good humoured and calm exchanges.

Moreover, Campbell was not the only member of New Labour’s communications team to appear to court personal attention. Both Labour minister, Peter Mandelson and Charlie Whelan, Gordon Brown’s spin chief in the early days of New Labour, were happy to discuss their work in public, perhaps deliberately fuelling “the early New Labour myth that they invented spin [in order] to appear clever – and it rebounded on them” (Peter Riddell 2011o). For example, in a television documentary entitled ‘We are the Treasury’, Whelan, asked about his handling of the media, famously stated: “You just have to be economical with the truth...you should never lie, but it’s very difficult. But they’ll all understand tomorrow and forgive me” (Rawnsley: 77). It is hard to imagine any of Whelan or Campbell’s coalition successors saying something similar.

3. Systemic Changes

Behind the boasting lay real action. The New Labour Government took less than a week to signal its intentions to reform the government communications system, with Campbell telling a meeting of information officers that he “wanted them to be able to predict what would be on the front page of the Sun the next day – and help write it” (Seldon: 301). The message was clear: Campbell wanted a civil service press machine which was more assertive, more proactive, and one which was able to respond at speed (Matt Tee 2011h). Paul Waugh, a political journalist since the 1990s, recalled that Labour spinners found the civil service “an interference at worse, and an obstruction at best” (Interview 2011m).

Institutional measures were also taken. Both Jonathan Powell – Blair’s Chief of Staff – and Campbell, were granted Order in Councils which gave them the power to issue diktats to civil servants; and, following the 1998 Mountfield Report into Government Communications, Campbell created a Strategic Communications Unit (SCU), which historian Anthony Seldon has described as an attempt to replicate New Labour’s media unit in opposition (1994:302). The Campbell-inspired shake up was the source of considerable public disquiet as civil service communicators “found themselves struggling to deliver – or even wondering if they wanted to” (Matt Tee 2011h). During Tony Blair’s first term alone eight departmental heads of news left the civil service (Wheeler 2003: 10). By 2001 every single one of the 44 civil service Heads of Information in post in 1997 had resigned or retired (Franklin 2004: 259).

Painful at the time, the revolution has largely shown itself to be durable, with Matt Tee believing that government press officers are “significantly better” since Campbell’s overhaul (Matt Tee 2011h). Paul Goodman (Interview 2011a) suggested that the Civil Service had adjusted to the tempo set by Campbell, while the former Political Editor of The Times, Peter Riddell said that although the coalition had been more “sensitive” in its handling of the civil service communications arm, it also had “plenty of other more important things going on” to worry about than a further round of restructuring (Interview 2011o). That said, some impatience can be seen, with 10 Downing Street, following negative media coverage about the Government’s health service reforms in 2012 placed David Cameron’s own special advisor on health policy, as well as a specialist press officer in the Department of Health, in an attempt to improve its media performance. (Porter 2011).

4. Other features of Campbell’s regime have also been incorporated by the Conservative media team. By the summer of 2008 Coulson had installed a Labour-style ‘grid’ system (Henry Macrory 2011d), while a daily 9am meeting in Downing Street, as

instigated under Campbell (Franklin 1998:6), continues to try and set the government's daily news agenda (Interview 2011d). However the Strategic Communications Unit has been disbanded and the Downing Street and Cabinet Office press operations merged (Seldon 2011), but Campbell's 2000 decision to place the lobby briefings on an attributable basis remains. "It's a position of strength and Coulson and co have benefited" said Mike Granatt (Interview 2001h). "If it's on the record it will always trump a briefing behind the scenes" (ibid). Overall, it seems that the consensus is that Campbell's overhaul of the civil service's approach to government communications has been a positive inheritance for the coalition, helping to create a more proactive civil service now attuned to the demands of the 24-hour media. **The impact of coalition**

By arriving in government with such a huge majority, Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell were in a strong position to attempt to exert complete control of message over their backbenchers, many of whom were new to politics and "anxious to demonstrate loyalty and so keen to allow their responses to be influenced" (Jones 2001:39). Without such a majority, Clegg and Cameron had little choice but to reduce their efforts to seek complete on-message control from their MPs, in turn reducing the space for anonymous briefing and allowing outspoken opinions to appear more acceptable.

Crucially, the leadership of both parties appear to have accepted that this is an inevitable consequence of coalition government. "They have come to – correctly – realise that it doesn't matter that bits of the coalition are arguing for different things", suggested Nicholas Jones (Interview 2011j). The consequence, said former head of the Government Information Service, Mike Granatt, is that briefing has become much more overt, and much more obvious. "When they disagree they say it quite openly, or they get their backbenchers to say it for them" he argued. "They are being used to brief against the other party's position, which is an enormous advantage" (Interview 2011f). Indeed, during the run up to the 2012 Budget, continual leaks were praised by some commentators (Sieghart 2012) as a grown up way of government, while George Osborne himself told a parliamentary committee that the long list of pre-budget leaks was an effect of being in coalition. Tory MPs grumble at the "public negotiating strategy" (Forsyth 2012) adopted by the Liberal Democrat, and Conservative ministers were recently sufficiently annoyed to attack Vince Cable, the Liberal Democrat Business Secretary, over his public damning of a government-commissioned report (Martin 2012), but the open negotiations have become a feature of coalition government.

In contrast, Andrew Sparrow suggested that the Labour Party was “so traumatised by splits and feuds of the 1980s that they developed the utter conviction the solidarity was all that mattered” (Interview 2011b), with independent thought seen as “abhorrent” (ibid). Downing Street may prefer to avoid stories of backbench rebellion or coalition splits, but the circumstances of coalition make a pragmatic approach almost unavoidable.

“We have two separate factions, but if we start briefing against each other then the whole government will fall apart. So we’re much more constrained”, explained James McGrory (Interview 2011g). “If you aggressively counter brief then you would get a few headlines and paint the Lib Dems in a good, aggressive light, but the next time you do something they will brief it against you. And what’s the overall picture? It’s that the Government can’t agree and is hysterical.” (ibid.)

5. New Technology = loss of control?

“One of the things that killed spin was the net. You can’t control information in the way that you could and you have to react ever faster”, suggested Paul Goodman (Interview 2011a). Being in opposition allowed the Conservative Party greater flexibility to adapt, with new right-of-centre blogs being created as a forum to discuss the failings of government (Eaton 2009). In power, Labour found it less easy to react: it was reported that Labour’s Transport Minister Tom Harris was sacked due to the opinions he had expressed on his personal blog (Kirkup 2008), while the creation of the Labourlist website in 2009 was initially dismissed as a centrally-controlled propaganda site (Hinsliff 2009).

The effect of the blogosphere on attempted spin has been dramatic too, acting as a “constant source of media monitoring...as soon as it spots ‘spin’ it shrieks” (Gunn et al 2011:289). Indeed, two Labour spinners, Damian McBride and Derek Draper, found their activities closely monitored by the blogger Guido Fawkes, who ended up claiming the “scalps” of both (ibid). Peter Watt, a former Labour Party General Secretary, who claimed that in that role he was able to keep his party under a more or less disciplined line, accepted the new challenges to such control: “The internet, Facebook, Twitter and the like have all meant that even if you wanted to run a command and control political operation, it would be pretty bloody difficult... You can no more stop discussion and debate taking place on the internet, than you can stop any inevitable analogy you can think of” (2011). To woo one independent blogger, let alone the 1859 political blogs active in October 2010 (Gunn et al: 285), is a far less predictable mission than wooing a single newspaper proprietor, with “a

multitude of interpretations” (Andrew Sparrow 2011b) rapidly dispersed as any given event occurs.

6. The mood at the time or the only story in town?

Whilst spin was the story which damaged the New Labour Government, so ‘sleaze’ had once hurt the Conservatives. Various stories about alleged Labour ‘sleaze’ were run but they never built into an ongoing ‘sleaze’ theme, prompting complaints from the former Conservative Prime Minister John Major (Woodward 2007). Similarly, stories of spin have not stuck to the current administration in the way they became the running leitmotif of the previous Labour Government. Political journalists pursue stories which fit within a commonly accepted narrative (at the time of writing it is that after a series of highly publicised u-turns on policy proposals, the Government is in the grip of a self-caused ‘omnishambles’ (Massie 2012)).

Henry Macrory, a former spokesperson for the Conservatives in Downing Street, recalled the media’s role in creating these narratives. At the time of ‘sleaze’ he was a political journalist: “I was around for ‘Tory sleaze’, and it just became ridiculous”, he admitted. “All newspapers wanted was the next sleaze story, and completely innocent people were being turned over” (Interview 2011d). With the election of the Labour Government, spin became the next ‘big thing’. In part this can be attributed to the failures of the opposition to find any other grounds on which to attack the Government and to undermine its vast majority (Sparrow: 192). Where Parliament had previously provided a rich array of stories, as John Major’s Conservative majority gradually vanished over the lifetime of the Parliament, under Blair’s Labour government Parliament virtually dried up as a source of news (Gaber 2011). In contrast, by February 2011, the Coalition Government had already witnessed more rebellions during votes in the Commons than during the entire first term of Blair’s Labour government (Cowley 2012 and Shackle 2011).

Labour’s rough handling of journalists was also pivotal in prompting journalists to react by deliberately seeking out stories about spin, with an official House of Lords report into government communications noting that New Labour’s decision to “favour an inner circle of reporters...led to a “sense of exclusion” among the rest of the media, which resulted in a “tendency to challenge every piece of government information from whatever source” (HOL, 2009: 10). This was, argued Peter Osborne, author of the first biography of Alastair Campbell, “the stage when the phrase spin doctor took firm hold in British public life” (1999:

242), and by the turn of the century private polling conducted by New Labour showed that ‘spin’ had become as toxic for the public as ‘sleaze’ had for the Tories (Cockerell 2000:10); by then, as Jonathon Powell noted, “we had lost the battle. You cannot communicate your message if the communicating of it itself gets in the way” (2010: 203).

Discussion: spinning on a different cycle?

Following the 1992 general election victory for the Tories one Labour supporting journalist wrote angrily that: “The Tories.... care about media manipulation. We need to be more suspicious than ever because they – the Conservatives – are more solicitous of their image than ever. The Government measures success in the thickness of the press cuttings file and the camera angle on News at Ten” (Campbell 1992: 15). That journalist was Alastair Campbell.

But where Campbell was just one of a number of key New Labour figures to learn from the Conservative “solicitousness”, so David Cameron, George Osborne, and, until his resignation, Andy Coulson learned from New Labour’s excessiveness. Parliamentary arithmetic, technological developments, and the personalities of the key figures involved have also played their part, while the media’s attention has moved on, partly as a generation of journalists grows up with the more assertive government approach to communication being the norm, and partly because it recognises, according to James McGrory, that to get rid of spin “is biting off the hand that feeds it” (Interview 2011g).

Despite being seen as “the bogey man of spin” (Andrew Sparrow 2011b), Campbell’s legacy remains intact amongst his fellow spinners. The Tories, when in opposition, recognised the need for a Campbell-esque figure to lead their communications operation. Likewise Labour leader Ed Miliband’s choice of communications chief Tom Baldwin, a former Times journalist was greeted with headlines such as “Miliband appoints ‘new’ Alastair Campbell” (PoliticsHome 2010). Meanwhile Liberal Democrat MPs, in government for the first time in 80 years, have been expressing doubts about their own party’s approach to media communications: “They complain that they want an Alastair Campbell; they want an Alastair Campbell in f----- sandals” says James McGrory, press secretary to party leader Nick Clegg (Interview 2011g).

Relations between politicians and the press may change. The recent fall-out of the phone-hacking scandal has seen David Cameron admit that he was “too close” to Rupert Murdoch’s News International and argue that “the relationship between politicians and media needs resetting” (Cameron 2011), with Ed Miliband also making similar arguments (Miliband 2011). But this is not to say that politicians will cease attempting to influence the media to get their message across. As Stewart Wood, an advisor to Ed Miliband reflected: “There’s a world of difference between party leaders making their case to editors and political journalists – which is perfectly legitimate – and a culture of feeling that there are certain things you can’t say, or have to serve up” (Interview 2011n).

As the coalition parties moves closer towards the next general election, due in 2015, and each party looks beyond the lifetime of the Coalition, no doubt greater attempts will be made to persuade the media to push a particular message or line, a development likely to see the return of the anonymous briefings and even the bullying of the press which became the hallmarks of New Labour’s approach. “Cracks must appear, they will appear, and when they do the spin will become more obvious” according to Andrew Sparrow (Interview 2011b). Some journalists who initially felt comfortable with the new approach, now suggest that a greater emphasis on courting the media is already required. Nigel Nelson of the People says this is “inadvertently the most secretive government I’ve ever come across, not out of malice but because they just don’t get media relations. Because they float so little they get into a huge mess with things like the Health Bill and the Budget. They should be softening people up and testing the waters of opposition and using the media to do it.” (Interview 2012I)

But whatever course the second half of the coalition takes, the grounds on which the spin war will be fought will be different. Could the Liberal Democrats’ experiences of trying to manage the press as the third party in British politics – one former Sun editor described the Lib Dems as the “invisible party...purposely ignored” (Yelland 2010) – have any effect on the Conservatives Party’s attitude to media control? Might falling turnout at the polls (Worcester 2010), mean the electorate is “even less willing to read behind a headline or a tweet” (Interview 2011p)? Or, as politicians learn to use the social media, will spin re-emerge as a major political story? And perhaps most intriguing of all, will the Leveson Inquiry, set up in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal, result in any fundamental changes in the relations between the media and politicians? And will Lord Justice Leveson’s warning on excessive media attempts to control the media, that “in these kinds of respect, growing public awareness and impatience is simply making this kind of conduct counter-productive

for politicians (if not for the press) in the critically important attempt to seek public trust and confidence" (2102), be heeded?

A few months before taking office, David Cameron declared that "we have had 13 years of government by initiative, press release and media management and it is literally pointless" (2010). But if spin, as a method and a story, has lost the potency it enjoyed in the early days of New Labour, that is not to say that it is no longer functioning. While politicians and media proprietors struggle to reach a conclusion on the Leveson report's recommendations, the noises from the political side suggest a recognition that the high-level influencing of editors and proprietors will at least, as Leveson suggests, be subject to greater transparency (201). But on the frontline of politics, Governments have no choice, indeed it is a duty, to communicate with journalists and voters, and it is a task which inevitably involves attempting to put the best possible gloss on what is reported and seek to wield as much influence as possible across the media. It is an unavoidable part of the political process, though probably one best undertaken if the spin cycle is set to whirl at a less than frenetic pace than it has in recent years.

Conclusion

To spin effectively, the spinner themselves should not be part of the story. On that basis, the first year of the coalition government was 'spun' more effectively than the first year of New Labour. As the paper has already discussed, Alastair Campbell arrived in government as a well-known figure, while his methods only increased his profile. For the coalition, Andy Coulson made headlines for very different reasons, while the sort of media mishandlings that later in the life of the coalition government led to a spate of special adviser resignations and the associated negative media coverage, were avoided for at least the first 12 months of the coalition's existence. Nor was the government's approach to media handling the source of significant media criticism or attention. So spin lite, in this instance, was a more successful approach: special advisers, to give the spinners their official title, may have been well known at Westminster, but in the wider world their work went below the radar.

However, when compared to public approval ratings, New Labour's heavier approach certainly reaped more immediate rewards. Before the negative coverage of the Labour government's approach had gathered momentum, at the end of Tony Blair's first summer in

power his approval rating stood at an unprecedented 93 per cent, which led a leading commentator to note a “level usually only manufactured in the realms of totalitarian dictatorships” (Rawnsley 2000:71). The coalition, on the other hand, had won rather more lukewarm levels of approval. After 100 days in office, David Cameron's net approval rating stood at +20, and Nick Clegg's at just +5 . As a statistical comparison it would seem that a more controlling approach to media management is the way to gain public support, and it is telling that Alastair Campbell's name repeatedly surfaces when Labour's media team for the 2015 election is discussed – indeed, Blair's former press chief is said to be involved, albeit only occasionally, in shaping current leader Ed Miliband's strategy.

So it appears that politicians, despite mounting platitudes about the importance of ‘authenticity’, still believe that a heavy-handed approach to spin is how best to gain immediate political advancement. However, as this paper has demonstrated, in the long term the deployment of ‘spin heavy’ has helped create a poll lead that was not durable. The coalition's poll ratings may not ever have scaled the high points of New Labour, but for its major partner, the Conservatives, its polling has been first stable and then improving. However, that's not to say that the coalition’s approach to communication has been flawless: one of the biggest crises during the first year of the coalition was caused by the failure to successfully explain its NHS reforms. "We screwed up", as one MP admitted, as a failure to brief journalists clearly, to persuade columnists, or to agree a clear message placed the government under considerable pressure. Spin lite was clearly a mite too pale at times.

Ends

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